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ABSTRACT

Projects supported by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) have a very high survival ratio after the grant has ended. The reason for this success seems to lie in the structure and principles of FIPSE. These principles (which can be adopted as guidelines in the creation of other innovation funds) include allowing maximum local freedom to frame a problem and design a solution, and maintaining high standards for assessing the significance and feasibility of proposals. This creates a rigorous competition in which only the very best of the many proposals received are funded. Most ideas and action plans are not very good, but a few are very good indeed. A competitive, open review process such as this is ideal for spotting the good ones. Several states have created their own improvement funds. For those wanting to obtain FIPSE guidelines, the address is provided. (DC)

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IMPROVING EDUCATION: THE PARADOX OF RISK

by Stephen C. Ehrmann

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IMPROVING EDUCATION: THE PARADOX OF RISK

Many colleges hesitate to pay the price for reallocating funds to new programs because innovation is risky. And they are right--innovation is indeed risky, as many studies have shown. Yet a $422,000 external evaluation of projects supported by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) indicates that 70% of this Federal agency's seed grants survive and grow after the grant ends (in contrast to rates of 5-15% in other seed grant programs). The evaluators found evidence of FIPSE's national influence on educational practice in a variety of arenas. In addition, Fund projects spotlighted in Innovation Abstracts over the last two years have received hundreds of inquiries, further evidence of the significance of their ideas and the success of their efforts. All this has been done on a budget equal to about $1.00 for each postsecondary learner in the country, or 11.1 million dollars.

How has the Fund exerted such influence when its guidelines even state that proposals be "risk-taking . . . new and unproven ideas"? The answer does not seem to lie in any one person: the Fund's record of achievement has been built over a decade, under four presidents, six directors and acting directors, and an almost complete turnover in staff.

The answer seems to lie in the structure and principles of the agency. *These principles might be adopted as guidelines to help institutions create their own innovation funds at the campus, district, or system levels.*

Local Freedom to Frame the Problem and Design the Solution

The first principle is to give local applicants maximum freedom to define the most important problems facing their institutions, and to encourage them to design significant, practical solutions. Guidelines must be clear and flexible. All kinds of organizations are free to apply.

The result of this principle for FIPSE is over two thousand proposals a year. Evidence of the openness that the principle creates comes from the variety of project directors. The evaluators found that one-third of the grantees had never applied to the Federal Government before.

High Standards for Assessing Significance and Feasibility

The Fund is looking for proposals whose results will be widely useful, in that the problem is widely felt, the solution is a significant improvement, and the project is likely to perform as promised.

The basic purpose of the Fund is to improve educational opportunities for learners, whether directly or indirectly. A project may be a new idea for a single classroom or a change in a regional accreditation process, but all proposals must convince readers that, ultimately, nationally significant improvement in learning will occur. (It helps if the proposal is based on a vision of what some real human beings want and need to learn; many poor proposals talk about faceless "learners.")

Each year the Fund publishes in its guidelines a short essay on what seem to be the most important problems and opportunities facing postsecondary education. This essay is not meant to restrict applicants in their choice of problems. Instead it suggests a standard of significance: send us your proposals if they address problems as important as these.

A National Marketplace of Ideas About Improvement

The effect of this structure--freedom to structure proposals, lots of proposals, and few grants--is to create a rigorous competition among ideas. The staff creates

from the proposals a structure of priorities useful in selecting the best projects. There are several reasons why such a marketplace of ideas can work.

First, the best proposals are very good indeed. The grants competition gives people and institutions an annual excuse to pause, step back from routine and crises, and develop opportunities for major improvement.

Second, with so many proposals, any problem will be defined and addressed in a variety of ways.

Third, the numbers of proposals on a topic furnish a rough barometer of interest and importance.

Fourth, the marketplace can function because the process and the Fund staff are organized to compare these many ideas and approaches to improvement. Any proposal might be read by any staff member. External readers contribute ratings. And competitive proposals are the center of continual debates.

Adapting the Model to a Community College

Suppose for example that a community college wanted to cut costs while increasing educational effectiveness. It might begin with formal and informal evaluations of current cost-effectiveness, comparing value added against costs, and against the cost of similar operations in other districts. Howard Bowen reports in his book, THE COSTS OF HIGHER EDUCATION, that campuses of similar size, structure, and reputation spend substantially different amounts per student. It appears there is room to cut costs without harming effectiveness. Similarly, education research suggests that one can increase effectiveness without increasing cost. Application guidelines could point to particular problems and opportunities, providing a context for the initial writing of proposals by staff, students, departments, administrative units, and institutions and firms outside the district.

Periodic competitions and grants, coupled perhaps with workshops on the art of designing and implementing change, might well have a cumulative impact on cost-effectiveness and on staff skills in creating such improvement. Periodic re-evaluations could spotlight both progress and new opportunities.

The Paradox of Improvement: A Resolution

Most ideas for improvement are not very good, but if the people closest to the problem are given the occasion and the incentive, some few of the ideas can be very good indeed. The same goes for action plans. Most are not likely to work, because most faculty and staff have little training or experience in planned change and because not every good idea gets the backing it needs. But some few are very good indeed. And a competitive, open review process can spot such ideas and plans in advance. In fact, the biggest proposed changes from the status quo may be less risky, rather than more--they are more capable of attracting the necessary support and resources. So it may be possible for a local improvement fund of this type to demonstrate that improvement is not only a good investment, but a safe one.

Stephen C. Ehrmann
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Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education

Opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the policy of the Fund nor of the U.S. Department of Education. Several states have created improvement funds, including Virginia and the California Community College System. The Oregon State University is using a FIPSE grant to create a loan fund for improvements, and is testing the power of the concept to attract private gift capital; contact Dean Osterman, Director of Instructional Development, OSU, Corvallis, OR 97331. If you know of such a fund or want to obtain Fund guidelines which describe the agency's process, the address of FIPSE is 7th and D Streets, S.W., Room 3102, Washington, D.C. 20202.

KAREN WATKINS, EDITOR
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